Gender Discrimination Faced By African-American Women As Depicted In The Film 'Hidden Figures

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the representation of gender discrimination experienced by African-American women in the film *Hidden Figures*. It aims to identify the forms and impacts of workplace discrimination faced by the main character, Katherine Goble Johnson. Grounded in Black Feminist Theory as articulated by Patricia Hill Collins, this qualitative study employs descriptive analysis. Data were obtained through close textual analysis of the film, supported by relevant scholarly literature, including journals, articles, theses, and credible online sources. The findings reveal that Katherine Goble experiences multiple forms of discrimination, including gender-based exploitation, limited access to promotion, wage inequality, racial segregation, and unequal treatment within a predominantly white, male-dominated work environment. Despite these constraints, the film portrays her resilience, professional competence, and intellectual contribution, emphasizing that her value as an employee is defined by merit rather than gender or race. The study highlights how *Hidden Figures* reflects broader structural inequalities in the workplace and underscores the ongoing struggle for gender and racial equality.

Keywords: *Gender discrimination; African women; hidden figures; gender-based exploitation; unequal treatment*

INTRODUCTION

Despite substantial social and economic transformations that have expanded women's participation in the labor market, gender discrimination in the workplace remains a persistent and global problem. Although employment is increasingly framed as gender-neutral and merit-based, women continue to experience unequal treatment in recruitment, promotion, compensation, and workplace recognition. These inequalities are further intensified when gender intersects with race and ethnicity, placing women of color at heightened risk of marginalization.

Gender discrimination in the workplace refers to differential treatment based on sex or gender that limits access to opportunities and resources. Such discrimination is socially constructed rather than biologically determined. Oakley (1972) conceptualizes gender as a social category distinct from biological sex, while Caplan (1987) emphasizes that behavioral differences between men and women are shaped through cultural and social processes. In line with this view, Zainuddin (2006) defines gender as

a patterned social relationship that structures power relations between men and women. These perspectives underscore that gender inequality in employment is rooted in social systems rather than natural differences.

Empirical evidence demonstrates that gender discrimination persists across both developing and developed contexts. In Indonesia, female laborers often encounter precarious working conditions, limited bargaining power, and restricted access to labor rights. Women who challenge unfair treatment may face retaliation, including dismissal, while social stigma frequently positions female workers as secondary to men. Moreover, caregiving responsibilities disproportionately borne by women contribute to early workforce exit, limiting long-term career advancement despite comparable qualifications (Karnadi, 2019).

Similarly, gender discrimination remains prevalent in the United States. Parker and Funk (2017) report that approximately 42% of employed women have experienced workplace gender discrimination, including perceptions of incompetence, exclusion from leadership support, and unequal evaluation. These experiences are particularly pronounced among African-American women, who report higher rates of discrimination than white and Hispanic women. Data from the Economic Policy Institute indicate that although African-American women have historically participated in the labor force, they remain concentrated in undervalued and low-paying positions, while men continue to dominate top-earning roles. In 2016, women earned only 81 cents for every dollar earned by men, reflecting entrenched structural inequality (DotFacts, 2020).

Legal cases further expose systemic gender bias in employment. For instance, multiple female employees filed federal lawsuits against Wal-Mart, alleging discriminatory practices in pay, promotion, and training. These cases highlight how institutional policies can reproduce gender inequality despite formal commitments to equality (The New York Times, 2011).

Gender inequality in the workplace has long been challenged through feminist movements, particularly during the second wave of feminism in the 1960s–1980s, which foregrounded issues of equal pay, workplace rights, and women's autonomy. However, patriarchal structures continued to restrict women's access to decision-making power and leadership positions, especially in male-dominated fields.

These structural inequalities are also represented in popular culture. The film *Hidden Figures* (2016), directed by Theodore Melfi and adapted from Margot Lee Shetterly's biographical work, depicts the experiences of African-American women mathematicians at NASA during the Space Race. This study focuses on the character of Katherine Goble Johnson, whose experiences exemplify the intersection of gender and racial discrimination in a historically male-dominated scientific workplace.

This research aims to analyze the forms and impacts of gender discrimination experienced by Katherine Goble Johnson in *Hidden Figures*, drawing on Black Feminist Theory and Popular Culture Theory. By examining this representation, the study contributes to broader discussions of intersectionality, workplace inequality, and the cultural portrayal of marginalized women in professional spaces.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in textual and thematic analysis to examine representations of gender discrimination in the film *Hidden Figures* (2016). The research is informed by Black Feminist Theory, particularly the work of Patricia Hill Collins, which emphasizes the intersection of race, gender, and power in shaping Black women's lived experiences (Collins, 2000). A qualitative approach is appropriate for this study as it enables an in-depth interpretation of social meanings and power relations embedded within cultural texts (Creswell, 2014).

Data Sources

Data for this study are derived from both primary and secondary sources to ensure analytical depth and theoretical rigor.

1. Primary Source

   The primary data consist of the film *Hidden Figures* (Melfi, 2016), which serves as the central cultural text. The film was selected due to its biographical basis and its explicit depiction of gendered and racialized workplace structures within a historically documented institutional context.

2. Secondary Source

   Secondary data include peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, theses, and authoritative online publications related to gender discrimination, workplace inequality, Black Feminist Theory, and film analysis. These sources are used to contextualize the analysis and to support theoretical interpretation.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection involved systematic textual engagement with the film and a structured review of relevant literature. The procedures included:

1. Conducting a focused literature review to identify key concepts and analytical categories related to gender and racial discrimination.
2. Viewing the film multiple times to ensure familiarity with narrative structure, character development, dialogue, and visual symbolism.
3. Identifying and documenting scenes, dialogues, and interactions that reflect discriminatory practices or power imbalances in the workplace.
4. Organizing the extracted data into preliminary thematic categories informed by Black Feminist theoretical constructs.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted through thematic analysis guided by Black Feminist Theory. The analytical process followed four stages:

1. Data Identification: Relevant textual units (scenes, dialogues, and narrative events) were selected based on their relevance to gender and racial discrimination.

2. Thematic Coding**:** The selected data were coded according to recurring themes such as intersectional oppression, exclusion from authority, wage inequality, and institutionalized segregation.

3. Interpretive Analysis: The coded data were interpreted through Black Feminist concepts to examine how gender and race operate simultaneously to structure workplace inequality.

4. Synthesis: Analytical findings were synthesized to address the research objectives and to demonstrate how the film represents broader structural patterns of discrimination.

To enhance analytical credibility, interpretations were continuously compared with existing scholarly literature, ensuring theoretical consistency and minimizing subjective bias (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study examines the representation of gender discrimination in *Hidden Figures* (2016) through the experiences of Katherine Goble Johnson, focusing on both its forms and impacts in a racially segregated, male-dominated workplace. Drawing on Black Feminist Theory and Popular Culture Theory, the film is analyzed as a cultural text that reflects and critiques structural inequalities shaped by the intersection of race and gender.

As a form of popular culture, film functions as a site where social meanings and power relations are constructed and contested. *Hidden Figures* foregrounds African-American women's intellectual labor within a scientific institution that historically marginalized their contributions. Katherine's experiences illustrate how discrimination operates through institutional norms, bureaucratic rules, and everyday interactions rather than overt hostility alone.

1. Impacts of Gender Discrimination Portrayed in *Hidden Figures*

The analysis reveals several interconnected impacts of gender discrimination experienced by Katherine, including labor exploitation, limited promotion, wage inequality, racial segregation, and unfair institutional treatment.

a. Exploitation of Female Labor

The exploitation of female labor is evident when Katherine is urgently called to verify John Glenn's launch calculations:

Mr. Harrison: "Go find Katherine Goble. She needs to verify Glenn's 'Go/No-go', or we're staying on the ground."
Sam: "Yes, sir."
Sam: "I'm looking for Katherine Goble."
Katherine: "It's Katherine Johnson now."
Sam: "They need you to verify these coordinates."

Although Katherine is no longer formally assigned to the Space Task Group, her expertise is indispensable. However, she lacks institutional authority and recognition. This scene reflects a pattern identified in Black Feminist Theory, in which African-American women's labor is exploited for institutional benefit while access to power and legitimacy remains restricted.

b. Limited Promotion Opportunities

Restricted career advancement is illustrated in the following dialogue:

Katherine: "Sorry, Mama. New assignment. Space Task Group."

Mom: "Oh, my word. That sounds important. It's a promotion?"

Katherine: "It might be a slight promotion."

Katherine's uncertainty reveals her awareness of structural barriers that limit women's professional mobility. Despite working in a highly skilled position, her advancement is framed as marginal. This reflects gendered and racialized assumptions that position women—particularly women of color—as less suitable for authority in male-dominated fields.

c. Wage Inequality and Low Pay

Wage discrimination is explicitly articulated in Katherine's confrontation with Mr. Harrison:

Katherine: "There's no bathroom for me here."

Mr. Harrison: "What do you mean there is no bathroom for you here?"

Katherine: "There is no bathroom. There are no colored bathrooms in this building or any building outside the West Campus, which is half a mile away… Lord knows you don't pay colored enough to afford pearls! And I work like a dog, day and night."

The statement "you don't pay colored enough" directly links racial identity to economic inequality. From a Black Feminist perspective, wage disparity is part of a broader system that devalues African-American women's labor while demanding continuous productivity.

d. Racial Segregation in the Workplace

Racial segregation is reinforced through institutional discourse, as shown below:

Mitchell: "Things move fast around here. Your clearance. They've never had a colored in here before, Katherine. Don't embarrass me."

Katherine: *(sighs)*

This dialogue highlights Katherine's position as the first African-American woman in the Space Task Group, emphasizing both exclusion and surveillance. Black Feminist Theory explains how such environments intensify pressure on marginalized individuals to overperform while remaining socially isolated.

e. Unfair Treatment and Institutional Exclusion

Unfair treatment is further demonstrated when Katherine is removed from the Space Task Group:

Mr. Harrison: "Long story short, we no longer need a computer in this department. Progress is a double-edged sword. Let's have you report back to the West Group for now."

Katherine: "Thank you, sir."

Despite her contributions, Katherine is excluded under the guise of organizational progress. This decision reflects how institutional policies can operate as mechanisms of discrimination while appearing neutral, thereby limiting women's long-term professional development.

f. Film as Popular Culture and Social Critique

As a popular cultural text, *Hidden Figures* functions as both representation and critique. By centering Katherine Goble Johnson's experiences, the film challenges dominant historical narratives that marginalize African-American women's contributions. It exposes how gender and racial discrimination are structurally embedded in workplace practices and invites contemporary audiences to critically reflect on persistent inequalities in professional spaces.

2. Forms of Gender Discrimination in the Film *Hidden Figures*

Gender discrimination refers to unequal and differential treatment based on gender, which systematically disadvantages women in education, employment, and political participation. From a Black Feminist perspective, such discrimination cannot be separated from race, class, and institutional power (Collins, 2000). *Hidden Figures* illustrates how African-American women experience gender discrimination in ways that are simultaneously racialized. This section examines the forms of gender discrimination experienced by Katherine Goble Johnson, revealing how intersecting systems of oppression operate within a male-dominated scientific institution.

a. Underestimated Female Worker

Jim: "Pastor mentioned you're a computer at NASA."

Katherine: "Yes."

Jim: "What's that entail?"

Katherine: "We calculate the mathematics necessary to enable launch and landing for the space program."

Jim: (Laughing)

Jim: "That's pretty heady stuff."

Katherine: "Yes, it is."

Jim: "They let women handle that sort of… Uh. That's not what I mean…"

Katherine: "What do you mean?"

Jim: "I'm just surprised that something so…taxing..."

(Source: *Hidden Figures*, 2016: 36:30)

This interaction reflects the cultural assumption that intellectually demanding work is incompatible with femininity. Jim's surprise and hesitation reveal what Collins (2000) describes as *controlling images*—stereotypical ideas that frame women, particularly Black women, as less capable in professional and scientific domains. Katherine's calm resistance challenges this narrative, demonstrating how Black women must constantly negotiate credibility within spaces that doubt their competence.

b. Lower Professional Position
    Mr. Harrison: "How have the Grissom numbers been?"
    Paul: "They've been spot on."
    Mr. Harrison: "Give Glenn's orbit a go. But you run it all through Stafford, you understand?"
    Katherine: "Yes, sir. Thank you."
    Paul: "Computers don't author reports."
    (Source: *Hidden Figures*, 2016: 1:14:57)

Paul's statement reinforces occupational hierarchy by denying Katherine authorship and intellectual authority. According to Black Feminist Theory, Black women's labor is often valued instrumentally while their voices are excluded from decision-making processes (Collins, 2000). Katherine is positioned as a technical tool rather than a knowledge producer, reflecting gendered and racialized marginalization in professional spaces.

c. Exclusion from Professional Spaces
    Katherine: "Sir, if I could attend the briefings, I could stay current.."
    Paul: "Katherine, we have been through this. It is not possible. There is no protocol for women attending."
    Katherine: "There's no protocol for a man circling the Earth either, sir."
    (Source: *Hidden Figures*, 2016: 1:20:20)

The invocation of "protocol" functions as what Collins (2000) identifies as *institutionalized oppression*, where discriminatory practices are normalized through bureaucratic rules. Katherine's response exposes the inconsistency of these regulations, aligning with Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality, which explains how policies that appear neutral often disproportionately exclude women of color.

d. Restricting Women's Work Capacity
    Mr. Harrison: "Why is it she can't attend?"
    Paul: "Because she doesn't have clearance, Al."
    Katherine: "I cannot do my work effectively if I do not have all of the data and all of the information as soon as it's available.
    I need to be in that room, hearing what you hear."
    Paul: "Pentagon briefings are not for civilians. It requires the highest clearance.
    And she is a woman: There is no protocol for women to attending that meeting."
    (Source: *Hidden Figures*, 2016: 1:21:32)

This exchange demonstrates how institutional power limits women's professional development. Although Katherine's role requires access to critical information, gender-based restrictions prevent her from performing fully. Black Feminist Theory emphasizes that such exclusions are not individual acts of prejudice but structural mechanisms that maintain male dominance in elite professions (Collins, 2000).

e.   Silencing Women's Professional Voice
   Paul: "My numbers are spot on."
   Katherine: "I will double check them, sir. No problem."
   Katherine: "Uh… I'm not gonna be able to…"
   Paul: "Work on what you can read. The rest is classified. You don't have
   clearance."
   (Source: *Hidden Figures*, 2016: 20:58)

Here, Katherine's attempt to engage critically with her work is dismissed. This silencing reflects what Collins (2000) describes as epistemic exclusion, where Black women's knowledge and judgment are systematically devalued. Paul's authority remains unquestioned, while Katherine's expertise is constrained by imposed limitations.

f.   Racialized Marginalization
   Katherine: "I cannot work on what I cannot see, Mr. Stafford. It's ilegible."
   Paul: "Those numbers have already confirmed by two engineers in this department
   and   myself.   This   is   more   or   less   a   dummy   check."
   (Source: *Hidden Figures*, 2016: 40:06)

Paul's response minimizes Katherine's contribution and reinforces racialized assumptions about competence. Intersectionality theory explains that African-American women experience discrimination differently from both white women and Black men due to the overlapping effects of race and gender (Crenshaw, 1989). Katherine's role is reduced despite her proven ability.

g.   Suspicion Toward Female Competence
Mr. Harrison: "All right then, we have nothing to lose here. Give her everything she needs to work on Shepard's trajectories. Without redaction. Are we clear on that?"
Paul: "Are we sure about this?"
Mr. Harrison: "What's the issues, Paul? She is not a spy."
Paul: "I just don't think it's a good idea."
(Source: *Hidden Figures*, 2016: 45:32)

Paul's hesitation reflects persistent mistrust toward women's competence in high-stakes environments. Black Feminist Theory argues that Black women are frequently subjected to heightened scrutiny, where excellence is met with suspicion rather than validation (Collins, 2000). Katherine's experience exemplifies this dynamic within institutional power structures.

CONCLUSION

In relation to the first research objective, the findings reveal that the impacts of gender discrimination on Katherine Goble Johnson include restricted professional mobility, exclusion from decision-making processes, limited access to institutional knowledge, lack of formal recognition, and persistent surveillance of competence. These impacts directly reflect Collins's (2000) argument that Black women's labor is often exploited while their intellectual authority is systematically constrained. Katherine's professional experiences illustrate how institutional practices function to maintain hierarchies that privilege white male authority while marginalizing African-American women, regardless of individual merit.

Regarding the second research objective, this study identifies multiple forms of gender discrimination, including underestimation of intellectual ability, occupational segregation, exclusion from meetings, denial of authorship, restricted job responsibilities, silencing of professional voice, and racialized suspicion. These forms correspond to what Black Feminist Theory describes as *controlling images* and institutional mechanisms that normalize inequality. Furthermore, the justification of discriminatory practices through bureaucratic language such as "protocol," "clearance," and "classification" supports Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality framework, demonstrating how ostensibly neutral organizational rules disproportionately disadvantage women of color.

Importantly, the findings also affirm Black Feminist Theory's emphasis on Black women's agency. Katherine's persistence, strategic resistance, and professional excellence challenge dominant narratives that portray African-American women as passive subjects of discrimination. Instead, the film represents Black women as active knowledge producers who negotiate and contest structural constraints within oppressive systems.

In conclusion, *Hidden Figures* not only represents gender discrimination as a historical reality but also exposes its structural and intersectional foundations. By aligning empirical findings with Black Feminist Theory, this study confirms the theory's relevance in analyzing workplace inequality and underscores the value of popular culture as a critical site for examining gendered and racialized power relations. The study thus contributes to gender and cultural studies by demonstrating that workplace equality cannot be fully understood without an intersectional and Black Feminist analytical approach.

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